

DEXTER AVENUE KING MEMORIAL BAPTIST CHURCH
(Dexter Avenue Baptist Church)
454 Dexter Avenue
Montgomery
Montgomery County
Alabama

HABS AL-994
AL-994

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

DEXTER AVENUE KING MEMORIAL BAPTIST CHURCH (Dexter Avenue Baptist Church)

HABS No. AL-994

Location: 454 Dexter Avenue, Montgomery, Montgomery County, Alabama

Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church is located at latitude: 32.377133, longitude 86.302753. The coordinate represents the southern end of the sanctuary roof's ridgeline. This coordinate was obtained on March 23, 2010 from a Google Earth map of Montgomery, Alabama. The coordinate's datum is North American Datum of 1983. The Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church location has no restriction on its release to the public.

Present Owner: Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church

Present Occupants: Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church

Present Use: Upper level sanctuary for weekly services and weekday tours, lower level administrative offices, meeting space, and support areas

Historian: James A. Jacobs, HABS

Significance: The Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church is a nationally significant site for its association with Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement. The church was formally established in 1877 as an offshoot of the first independent black Baptist congregation in Montgomery, which had been founded a decade earlier in the wake of the Civil War. Initially operating out of a former slave trader's pen on the broad thoroughfare connecting downtown Montgomery with the State Capitol, the "Second Colored Baptist Church" purchased a prominent corner lot a few blocks to the east in 1879. Four years later, the congregation began construction of the present edifice. William Watkins, one of the church's founders and a builder-contractor, launched the project in 1883. While he oversaw all of the construction, the congregation retained a local Montgomery architect, Pelham J. Anderson, for the final design. The church was dedicated in 1889 and has remained in constant use since that time.

In 1954, Martin Luther King, Jr., arrived in Montgomery as the young new pastor for the congregation. During his tenure at Dexter, which would be his only full-time position as a pastor, King was, in his own words, "catapulted into the leadership of a movement which has succeeded in capturing the imagination of people all over this nation and the

world.”¹ The movement to which he referred was a boycott of Montgomery buses in 1955-56 by black riders, a prolonged event that was sustained by King as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association. Initially seeking change within the Jim Crow system, the bus boycott ultimately led to complete desegregation of the city’s buses. This outcome permanently altered the direction of the civil rights movement and set King on the path of civil rights leadership for which he is known worldwide today. For these reasons and for its centrality to the bus boycott, the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1974.²

¹ Pastor Martin Luther King, Jr. (hereafter **MLK**), introductory expressions for a report on the 1956-57 church year, as transcribed in *The Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 1877-1977*, ed. Zelia S. Evans and J. T. Alexander (Montgomery, AL: Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 1978), 108.

² For brevity in this report, “Dexter Avenue Baptist Church” or “Dexter” will be used in this report when referring to the church.

PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

- 1. Date of construction:** 1883-1889
- 2. Architect and builder:**

William Watkins (1843-1914).³ Watkins, a founding member and deacon in the church, was a successful builder-contractor and responsible for the construction of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.⁴ A 1914 resolution by the trustees gives some account of his character as viewed by his peers, stating:

It may not generally be known that Brother Watkins made many sacrifices for the advancement of this church, and for these sacrifices, and his fairmindedness, and upright dealing with all men, the church and general public held him in high esteem.⁵

The resolution goes on to state the “the present edifice was constructed by him serving as architect and builder,” an assertion that is only partially true.⁶ While relatively little is known about Watkins’s early life and background, he became a leading member of both

³ The 1900 Census recorded a month and year for William Watkins’s birth, January 1843, which is used in this report; however, his age does fluctuate from census to census: thirty-four in 1880, fifty-seven in 1900, and sixty-two in 1910. He probably died in March 1914. A resolution about his life read at a service on March 15, 1914, included the words “In the death of Brother Watkins.” As transcribed Evans and Alexander, 14.

Evans and Alexander compiled this volume to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the church. It contains numerous transcriptions of primary source documents as well as small essays related to aspects of the church’s history. The essays were based on church records reviewed in the 1960s and 1970s, published and unpublished primary source documents, and oral history. If possible, transcriptions were checked against surviving church documents located at an off-site records storage in Montgomery, Alabama.

In addition to being a member of the congregation, Dr. Zelia T. Evans was a professor in the Department of Education at Alabama State University, a historically black educational institution founded in 1867 and moved to Montgomery in 1887. It is said that the first day of class registration in Montgomery occurred in the basement of the church (Evans and Alexander, 15).

⁴ Charles Octavius Boothe, *Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama: Their Leaders and Their Work* (Birmingham, AL: Alabama Publishing Company, 1895), 60, for Watkins as a founder.

⁵ As transcribed in Evans and Alexander, 14.

⁶ See I:A:5, “Original plans and construction,” for a discussion of the church’s design. By claiming that Watkins was both “architect and builder,” the trustees in 1914, at least one of whom was a contemporary of Watkins and also a founder, probably desired to emphasize the importance of Watkins’s vital contributions to the establishment and growth of the congregation.

the congregation and Montgomery's African-American community.⁷ He and his wife, Sarah, had been born in Virginia and relocated to Montgomery by the time that Dexter Avenue Baptist Church was founded in 1877, and very likely even earlier.⁸ They were educated and clearly emphasized the importance of education to their children. Among those surviving to adulthood, daughters Lula, Gertrude, and Alice taught school, their older son, William, was a dentist, and their youngest child, Charles, was working as a grocery store clerk in 1910. The Watkinses resided in a house they owned.

Within the racially repressive environment that characterized much of the post-Civil War South, William Watkins and his family were able to achieve a high degree of success and relative stability despite the many forms of extreme discrimination. Such discrimination intensified with the departure of federal troops at the end of Reconstruction (1877) and included loss of political rights, the increase of violence—both premeditated and random acts, and the institution of draconian social and economic restraints.⁹ While, overall, Watkins's achievement was rare, it was not all that uncommon for the congregants of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Historian Houston Roberson has observed: "Dexter Avenue owed its large percentage of relatively privileged members to the presence of two schools, Alabama State University (originally Lincoln Normal School) and the Tuskegee Institute."¹⁰ Indeed, not only did the first course registration in Montgomery for what became Alabama State University occur at Dexter, William Watkins and Henry A. Loveless, another church founder, sat on the institution's first board of trustees.¹¹

Pelham J. Anderson (ca. 1837-1911).¹² Anderson immigrated to the United States from Ireland, arriving as a youth in New York on May 14, 1849.¹³ Except what little can be

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information about William Watkins and his family was drawn from the Montgomery (city) census schedules for 1880 (enumeration district 129, page 48), 1900 (enumeration district 102, page 14), and 1910 (enumeration district 92, book 4, page 12).

⁸ Their oldest daughter was six at the time of the 1880 census and had been born in Alabama.

⁹ Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), xv.

¹⁰ Houston Bryan Roberson, *Fighting the Good Fight: The Story of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 1865-1977* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² Pelham J. Anderson's year of birth is not consistent across sources. The New York Port Arrival Records for 1846-1851 document his arrival at age twelve from Ireland aboard the *Mary Mitchell* on May 14, 1849, making his likely birth year 1837. The 1870 census schedule for Montgomery list his age as thirty-one, making his birth year 1838 or 1839. The 1880 census schedule lists his age as forty-six, moving his possible birth year back to 1834. While an 1860 article in *The Montgomery Daily Mail* about his architectural practice refers to Anderson as "our young friend," just how young presently remains a

gleaned from census records, nothing is presently known about Anderson's life and movements during his first decade in the United States. He may have spent the period in Pennsylvania as the commonwealth is mistakenly listed as his place of birth in the 1870 census. Although he arrived from Ireland at the time of the potato famine, he may not have been one of the destitute and starving. While Anderson had been born in Ireland, his father was an Englishman and his mother's parents were French. He was ultimately well-educated and, by his early twenties, had established an architectural office in Montgomery in a prominent location on Court Square.¹⁴ Newspaper staff for *The Montgomery Daily Mail* visited Anderson at his office in the summer of 1860, later reporting on seven major projects and noting the existence of "several designs for large and small private residences."¹⁵ Although the building that most excited the visitors—a planned Methodist church—was never realized, four of the projects are believed to have come to fruition: the "Figh Block" on Bibb Street, a school building near the Capitol, "Hammer Hall Seminary," and a synagogue (the Temple Beth-Or), which was predicted to be "quite an ornament to Church street."¹⁶ The writer for the *Daily Mail* went on to praise Anderson's designs as possessing: "a harmonious, poetic mixing of tasteful ideas, that at once gives them character, and stamps their author an Architect of great diversity of ideas."

With such a glowing account of his talents, after secession the prospects for Anderson's architectural practice may have been initially quite favorable as Montgomery was named the first capital of the Confederacy in February 1861. These prospects likely dimmed

mystery. See: "Building Improvements," *The Montgomery Daily Mail* 10 Jul. 1860. Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information about Pelham J. Anderson and his family was drawn from the Montgomery (city) census schedules for 1870 (page 20) and 1880 (enumeration district 129, page 22).

The Alabama Historical Commission provided basic information on Anderson's career, including citations for the 1860 references to his business appearing in *The Montgomery Daily Mail*.

¹³ Arrival manifest for the *Mary Mitchell*, 14 May 1849, information accessed online, 12 May 2009, Ancestry.com. This database cites another online database entitled "Irish Immigrants: New York Port Arrival Records, 1846-1851," created by The Generations Network, Inc., Provo, UT, 2001, which in turn cites a study entitled "Famine Irish Entry Project, 1846-1851," donated to the National Archives and Records Administration (Washington, DC) by the Center for Immigration Research, Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, now part of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

¹⁴ Advertisement, "Pelham J. Anderson, Architect, &C," *The Montgomery Daily Mail*, the notice ran daily through the month of Dec. 1860 until 9 Jan. 1861.

¹⁵ "Building Improvements," *The Montgomery Daily Mail* 10 Jul. 1860.

¹⁶ Ibid. The synagogue was completed in 1862 and still stands at the corner of Catoma and Church streets. The Jewish congregation moved to a new building early in the twentieth century and sold their building to the Catoma Street Church of Christ. See Robert Gamble, *The Alabama Catalog: Historic American Buildings Survey, A Guide to the Early Architecture of the State* (University, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1987), and Durden Stough, *A History of the Catoma Street Church of Christ, 1879-1973* (Montgomery, 1973?), transcript accessed online, 19 May 2009, <http://www.therestorationmovement.com/alabama/catomastreet.htm>.

very quickly, first, with the movement of the capital to Richmond in May 1861 and, later, by the dislocation and expense of the war itself. It is not known how involved Anderson was in Confederate cause, but he emerged from the war well enough, returning to his architectural practice and establishing a family.¹⁷ A lack of projects may have compelled him to take the position of Register in the U. S. Land Office for approximately ten years beginning in the early 1870s.¹⁸ By 1883, he was no longer affiliated with that office and was again noted as an architect in the city directory for Montgomery. Except for the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, however, there are no other buildings constructed after the Civil War presently attributed to Anderson.

3. **Owners:** As “Trustees of the Second Colored Baptist Church,” Henry A. Loveless, Samuel Phillips, and Eli Langston purchased the lot on which the church building stands on January 30, 1879 for \$270.00.¹⁹ John Egger acted as trustee in the transaction for the deed holder, Charles H. Ewald.²⁰ The property has never passed out of church ownership.
4. **Original and subsequent occupants:** The Dexter Avenue Baptist Church has occupied the building since its completion in 1889.
5. **Original plans and construction:**

The Site

Early in 1879, the “Second Colored Baptist Church” purchased a lot at the southwest corner of Dexter Avenue and Decatur Street, the former was known as Market Street at the time of purchase and renamed in 1884.²¹ The property contained a “small frame building” having the address of 8 South Decatur that the fledgling congregation would

¹⁷ The 1866 Montgomery city directory lists Anderson’s profession as “architect etc.” Anderson was married by the time of the 1870 census and already had two sons, Charles, age four, and William, age two. It is not known whether Anderson and his wife, Mary, had been married prior to or during the Civil War; however, the ages of their oldest children suggest that they may not have been married until after it was over.

¹⁸ The 1870 census records his occupation as “architect.” The 1873, 1878, and 1881 city directories list Anderson as the register of the U. S. Land Office.

¹⁹ Deed transcribed in Evans and Alexander, 11-12.

²⁰ It is not known whether Charles H. Ewald had any personal connection with the nascent congregation. It is assumed that Charles H. Ewald is the “C. H. Ewald” listed in the 1873 city directory for Montgomery as a partner in the firm of Ewald & Klein “bakers & confectioners.” C. H. Ewald does not appear in directories issued nearer the year of the land transaction.

²¹ In this report to avoid confusion, the name “Dexter Avenue” will be generally used instead of “Market Street” for the years prior to 1884. See Part I:B “Historical Context” for a general summary history of the early church.

have used for services and other activities.²² The address indicates the building did not front onto Dexter Avenue, a broad avenue connecting Court Square, the commercial center of Montgomery, with the Alabama State Capitol six blocks to the square's east.

Although it is perhaps surprising that, in post-Reconstruction Montgomery, a black congregation would have been able to purchase a high-profile site located only a block or so from the capitol steps on which Jefferson Davis had been inaugurated president of the Confederacy in 1861, there were conditions that made the action both plausible and possible. Michael F. Thurman, the present pastor of Dexter, has noted that the purchase occurred “during the narrow window of Union Army occupation and the progressive social policies of Reconstruction.”²³ Yet, this general atmosphere cannot wholly account for how a nascent black congregation was able to purchase the property. Although it was a corner site, the existing frame building used as a temporary church was oriented to the secondary street, and it could have been assumed that this orientation would be preserved in the future. The property seems to have also been located within an existing African-American district. An early church member recalled in a 1962 oral history that black Montgomeries “lived on both sides of the church. So the church started in a settlement surrounded by Negro residents and Negro businesses.”²⁴ A sale of land within an established African-American “settlement” might have proceeded largely unnoticed.

Little attention seems to have been paid by white Montgomeries to the congregation until construction began on a new church building that would front on Dexter Avenue. Tradition holds that members of the congregation began gathering bricks “discarded” during the paving of Dexter Avenue early in the 1880s.²⁵ This narrative suggests an inferior quality of brick for the lower portions of the wall, which does not appear to be the case, and the bricks were more likely collected from those removed when a streetcar

²² Both Roberson (19) and Evans and Alexander (13) mention a “small frame building” on the property.

²³ Michael Thurman, “Introduction,” *Voices from the Dexter Pulpit*, ed. Michael Thurman (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2001), 22.

²⁴ “Recollections of Mr. Morris Davis as recorded by J. T. Alexander on the occasion of a visit to see him at his home—595 South Union Street,” January 25, 1962. At the time of the research portion of the HABS project, this document was housed in a box of disparate materials located in the pastor's office in the basement of the church. All consulted items from this box will be hereafter cited *Dexter Files-Onsite*. The bulk of the church records have been moved to Records Retention, an offsite documents storage facility located in Montgomery. All items viewed at this location will be hereafter cited *Dexter Files-Records Retention*.

This black settlement was located in the vicinity of Montgomery's former slave trader's pens on and near Dexter Avenue between Lawrence and McDonough streets (Evans and Alexander, 10). These pens, located between what was then downtown Montgomery and the State Capitol, may have been one reason that a black settlement grew up in that location.

²⁵ Evans and Alexander, 13.

company laid tracks on Dexter Avenue.²⁶ The growing stacks of brick on or near the intended building site and a newspaper notice in December 1884 requesting donations for a “brick church on the corner of Dexter Avenue and Decatur streets” made the congregation’s intentions generally known to Montgomery.²⁷ These intentions did not sit well with all white Montgomerians, some of whom began to speak out about the siting of the church. Using the racist logic that ultimately gave structure to Jim Crow America, an anonymous white critic wrote to the editor of *The Montgomery Daily Advertiser* in May 1885:

The writer has no race prejudice that would cause him to do any injustice to ‘our brother black,’ or throw any obstacle in the way of his advancement intellectually, financially or morally. They are here and here to stay, and it is the duty of the white man to give him a fair chance in his efforts at improvement. In the [p]ast I have contributed to build churches and educational institutions for them. But, Mr. Editor, I recognize the fact that there is a propriety and fitness in all things proper to be done. It is proper for them to build churches and schoolhouses, and it is right for the whites to help them. But it is not right for them to build nor for us to assist them to build in every place.²⁸

Even the concept of “separate and equal” was beyond palatable to this critic, who believed that the construction of a black church on Dexter Avenue would mar what “will in the near future be one of the best improved streets in the city.”²⁹ Published complaints about the project appeared again in *The Montgomery Daily Advertiser* in August. One noted that “regret” about its location was “general,” while the other suggested that “some capitalist” or the city itself should make a reasonable offer to the congregation, otherwise it was well within its rights to build on the site.³⁰ While it is not known at this time whether any legitimate offers were made for the property, the leadership and members of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church would have most assuredly been aware of the social, racial, and geographic significance of the site’s high-profile location and they do not appear to have hesitated in moving the project forward. They also understood that the consequential site demanded a church building that not only met the needs of the congregation, but also would appropriately adorn one of Montgomery’s most prominent streets.

²⁶ Jeffrey C. Benton, *A Sense of Place: Montgomery’s Architectural Heritage* (Montgomery, AL: River City Publishing, 2001), 109.

²⁷ “Colored Baptist Church,” *The Montgomery Daily Advertiser* 4 Dec. 1884.

²⁸ “Dexter Avenue,” *The Montgomery Daily Advertiser* 6 May 1885. See also Roberson, 20.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “All Around the Town: Gossip from the Street and the Sidewalk,” *The Montgomery Daily Advertiser* 20 and 30 Aug. 1885.

Design and Construction

Though some Montgomerians publicly questioned the location of the church throughout the summer of 1885, the congregation continued to develop a concept for the building. It is not known exactly when the services of Pelham J. Anderson were secured for the design of the church, but evidence suggests that he likely became involved with the project sometime during the first half of 1885, one or two years after construction began. Tradition holds that work began in 1883, a date that is supported in the scant documentary record, and was superintended by church deacon and building contractor William Watkins.

By December 1884, *The Montgomery Daily Advertiser* could report that the church's "foundation...has already been laid," and the basement level was complete enough by mid-1885 to host the inaugural worship service.³¹ The church's appeal for funds at the end of 1884 is perhaps evidence both that the cache of collected bricks had been depleted and could not afford to move forward. In *Our Baptist Ministers and Schools* (1892), A.W. Peques included a transcription of a feature in the *Argus* of Alabama on Rev. A. N. McEwen who was pastor at Dexter beginning late-1883 or early-1884 through ca. 1892.³² The *Argus* noted that when McEwen arrived at Dexter, the situation was "unfavorable" and further elaborated: "the church was not only financially embarrassed but the members were entertaining such feelings towards each other that the work seemed to be at a stand-still."³³ The details of the discord at Dexter are not known. While a lack of funds alone could have perplexed the members and church leadership, this situation may have been intensified by the fact that William Watkins, the designer-builder, was also a church founder and deacon. It is entirely plausible that Watkins did not have enough experience or ability in design to bring that portion of the project to fruition, which would provide an explanation for why and when Pelham J. Anderson became involved with the building.

Whether a propitious outcome of the public appeal for money or a consequence of McEwen's leadership, by mid-July 1885, *The Montgomery Advertiser* could report: "the colored Baptists have perfected arrangements for the erection of a handsome brick church at the corner of Decatur street and Dexter avenue."³⁴ Furthermore, the language in the

³¹ "Colored Baptist Church," 4 Dec. 1884. Evans and Alexander, 13, for 1883; "Dr. Charles Flagg testified about his connection and activities as they relate to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church," March 28, 1961, Dexter Files-Onsite, for service in 1885; Roberson, 21, for July 1885.

³² Transcription of the Alabama *Argus* in A.W. Peques, *Our Baptist Ministers and Schools* (1892) (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1970), 335. Peques notes that McEwen "came to [Montgomery] in 1884 and took charge of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church" (335). However, Evans and Alexander note that he "represented Dexter Avenue Baptist Church" at a convention of Alabama's black Baptists in mid-November 1883 (24).

³³ Transcription in Peques (1970 reprint), 335.

³⁴ "Colored Church to be Erected," *The Montgomery Daily Advertiser* 16 Jul. 1885.

published update suggested that definite architectural plans had only recently been completed. That Anderson devised these plans is confirmed by the marble cornerstone, which bears his name and is dated 1885. The stone was positioned at the northeast corner of the church in a location that marks the transition from the lower to the upper portions of the walls. While the locations and nature of information chiseled onto cornerstones follow no single convention, the position of this cornerstone, the date and name recorded on it, and the wording of the newspaper notice indicate that Anderson probably became involved in the project during the first half of 1885. The church likely desired an architect based on a combination of factors including black self-determination, the prominence of the site, and contemporary changes in the area of building design.

The first two conditions are closely related. Historian Houston Roberson has observed that the Dexter congregation's steadfast resolve in locating their church on Dexter Avenue was intended to "demonstrate to the white community that black people were worthy and capable of negotiating shared public space."³⁵ The members were not outwardly intimidated by calls from white Montgomerians to build the church in a less conspicuous location, but they also understood that this decision would open them to greater scrutiny about what was planned for the site. Because no architect was consulted until after the completion of the foundation walls and basement level, it is plausible that the congregation and its leaders initially believed that Watkins would be able to design and construct the entire building himself. In time, either the limit of Watkins's design abilities had been reached or the stature of the project had grown to a point where the members felt compelled to consult with an architect more specifically trained in design.

The professionalization of the field of architecture became widespread during the nineteenth century in the United States. Traditionally, master builders had been responsible for both the design and construction of a building, relying on experience, precedent, and the localized availability of materials. The expansion of the nation during the antebellum period and the transfer of ideas and materials along a growing network of roads, canals, and railroads allowed even relatively small communities inland from the principal cities of the Atlantic seaboard to consider ambitious designs for new buildings. While such designs could be adapted by skilled local builders from prototypes in published pattern books, they were increasingly devised by a growing cohort of native-born American architects who received practical design training through apprenticeships in architectural firms.

Very quickly "architecture" came to both represent and contribute to the maturation of nationalism in the young country, which so greatly desired to move beyond its widely held status as a cultural outpost (from inside and outside the United States).³⁶ Within this climate, being considered an "architect" could have a significant impact on the success

³⁵ Roberson, 20.

³⁶ See W. Barksdale Maynard, *Architecture in the United States, 1800-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 67-70.

and profit of a business, both practitioners who received design training as well as the most able and ambitious of the master builders who, in time, took on the title “architect.” This trend intensified after the Civil War as the first Americans received training at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris or in newly created programs at schools in the United States that were based on the French model. By the time of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church’s construction, few major buildings in cities and towns were created without the involvement of an architect. For a relatively new African-American congregation poised to build a church on one of the most important streets in post-Reconstruction Montgomery, the need for the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to hire an experienced architect would have been even more of an imperative.

Since there is presently no evidence that Pelham J. Anderson was involved with the project before 1885, his contributions would have been prescribed by the foundation walls already constructed by William Watkins. At the outset, the leaders of the congregation likely relied on Watkins’s experience in construction to establish the dimensions of the building footprint. Although spacious, the building they envisioned was not overly ambitious in concept—a masonry rectangle (approximately 91’ x 44’) with pairs of supports, likely brick piers originally, evenly spaced down the center of the building to carry the floor joists of the sanctuary above.³⁷ The extent of the lower level and the thickness of the foundation walls would have guided Anderson as he worked out the most appropriate scale and proportions for the upper portion of the building. With Anderson’s design for the church “perfected” by mid-1885, Watkins superintended the realization of the plans over the next four years. The Dexter Avenue Baptist Church celebrated its first worship service in the sanctuary on November 28, 1889—Thanksgiving day.³⁸ It was estimated that the church cost more than \$12,000 to complete and reportedly described in a publication not long after its completion as “the finest in Montgomery.”³⁹

As fully developed, the concept for the church design started by Watkins and finished by Anderson was rooted in both metropolitan trends and rural traditions. The sanctuary level is situated over a full basement, an arrangement that, because of a steep grade change from front to back, positions the main entrance a full story above Dexter Avenue. This arrangement was a common one for urban American churches built in the late-

³⁷ Presently, the sixteen lower-level supports are steel columns set directly on the floor. Architectural drawings produced in 1979 by H. L. Walker & Associates, Architects & Planners for the building’s rehabilitation and lower-level renovation indicate that the supports extant at that time included a pair of steel columns nearest the front (north) doors, followed by three pairs of wood posts with five pairs of 16” x 16” brick piers at the southern end of the building. It is not known whether the supports were originally all uniform. Because the northern end of the lower level was the most accessible, and better lit and ventilated, it is possible that the less bulky wood posts were used in that area to create more usable space. See architectural plans in Box No. 191699, Dexter Files-Records Retention

³⁸ “Dr. Charles Flagg testified...,” March 28, 1961.

³⁹ Transcription in Peques (1970 reprint), 335.

nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries. In addition to creating a usable lower level, it placed the sanctuary up above the noise and commotion of the street and also allowed for greater amounts of natural light and ventilation. Although this spatial organization and its masonry construction are a nod to urban influences, the building reads more clearly as a country church. The uncomplicated rectangular footprint, front-facing gable roof, and central tower on the facade, as well as the mixture of such Gothic elements as tall windows with pointed heads and Victorian ones like brackets and molded detailing have much in common with contemporary churches being constructed in small towns and rural crossroads communities.

On the interior, the double-height sanctuary was a large rectangular space with a raised pulpit at the front (south) framed by an apse with polygonal walls and a half-dome ceiling. The apse was contained in a tabernacle frame composed of fluted pilasters topped by consoles and a modest entablature. Each of the lateral walls was pierced by five, double-height lancet windows, which were fitted on the exterior with pairs of louvered shutters. The pews were situated in two groups on either side of a wide center aisle and had decorative ends featuring a scroll sweeping downward from the back, becoming the armrest. A simple recessed shield is the only embellishment on the otherwise plain pew ends. A raised area at the front accommodated the pulpit and related furniture and the choir.

6. Alterations and additions:

Despite the passage of nearly 120 years since its completion, the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church retains a high degree of physical integrity. There have been no significant additions made to it and it would be wholly recognizable to the members who gathered for the first services in 1889. Still, as the long-time home of an active congregation and, later, a pilgrimage site as a landmark of the civil rights movement the building has been subject to change, particularly on the lower level.

It is not known exactly when various utility lines and fixtures were installed in the church. Montgomery began to modernize its utilities infrastructure during the last decades of the nineteenth century. As with other American cities, the laying of mains and creation of trunk lines in Montgomery was the principal focus of municipal authorities and individual property connections appeared in a more haphazard manner.⁴⁰ As one of the city's most important thoroughfares, the buildings along Dexter Avenue would have been able to be linked to municipal utilities early on, but the exact dates are presently unknown.

1905-1916—Sometime during the tenure of Robert Chapman Judkins as pastor, the church purchased a pipe organ made by the M. P. Möller Organ Company.⁴¹ Founded by

⁴⁰ Mary Ann Neeley, "Montgomery, 1885-1887: The Years of Jubilee," *Alabama Review* 32 (Apr. 1979): 108-118, for the beginnings of modernization.

⁴¹ Evans and Alexander, 37.

Mathias P. Möller in 1875, he moved the firm to Hagerstown, Maryland, in 1881 where it eventually became the world's largest organ manufacturer. When the company closed its doors in 1992, it had constructed over 12,000 organs. With a reputation for affordable and reliable instruments, a Möller organ would have been a logical choice for a congregation like Dexter.⁴² The installation of the organ on the right side of the pulpit required the extension of the raised choir stand approximately 4'-0" outward, which accounts for the variation in balusters on the right and left sides of the pulpit. The original extent of the choir stand is evident on the left side of the pulpit area. The pipes occupied a small room behind the choir stand accessed by a door in the apse. The room behind the choir stand appears to have been fully plastered and may have functioned as a vesting room or office for the pastor before housing the pipes. The arched opening cut through the wall and paneled wainscoting in all likelihood occurred as part of the organ installation. This room is located in a small, single story extension at the rear of the building; the remaining portions of the extension are occupied by the sanctuary apse and a second room to the left that historically and presently gives access to Decatur Street.

1927—The present double staircase rising from the sidewalk up to the main door on the sanctuary level is a replication, in steel and concrete, of the original wooden one. In 1927, a broad masonry stair was constructed, descending straight down from the main door to the sidewalk. The entrance on the lower level directly below the main door was accessed by doors positioned on the sides of the new stair. The stair was demolished as part of the 1977-80 restoration, although only after a discussion about whether they should be preserved for historical reasons. The minutes of the Restoration Committee noted in 1978: "the [Alabama] Historical Commission preferred having the building remain as it was during Dr. Martin Luther King's Administration."⁴³ This preference was considered by the committee, but ultimately rejected in favor of a stair more closely reflecting the original design.

1954-1958—While Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) was being considered by Dexter for the pastorate, he received some advice from Vernon Johns, who had just left the same position in 1952. Houston Roberson writes, "Johns warned King that, should he receive the call, he must act quickly in establishing his program, giving the deacons as little opportunity as possible to challenge him."⁴⁴ MLK apparently took Johns's thoughts to

⁴² Angelica Roberts, "M. P. Moller Organ Co. Music and Memories Live On," *The Herald-Mail* [Hagerstown, Maryland] 14 Jul. 2008, accessed online, 7 May 2009, http://www.herald-mail.com/?cmd=displaystory&story_id=198542&format=print; Jonathan Ambrosino, "A Good Story with a Bad Ending: M.P. Möller," *ISO News* [International Society of Organbuilders] (Nov. 1993), accessed online, 7 May 2009, <http://homepage.mac.com/glarehead/ambrosino/paper-iso1993.html>.

⁴³ "Minutes of the Restoration Committee," 22 Feb. 1978, Box No. 191699, Dexter Files-Records Retention.

⁴⁴ Roberson, 118-119. In "Murder and Biblical Memory," Ralph E. Luker notes that MLK, in his autobiography, recalled that he had gone to Montgomery alone for his trial sermon, which interestingly conflicts with a commonly repeated account that MLK had traveled with former Dexter pastor Vernon

heart as he quickly outlined both an overall vision for the how the church would function as an institution as well as a schedule of improvements for the physical plant. In his “Recommendations to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for the Fiscal Year 1954-1955,” MLK made the following proposal:

the church shall begin a four year renovation and expansion program. Immediate renovations for 1954-55 shall include: carpeting the main auditorium; public speaking system; electric cold water fountain; new pulpit furniture; Communion table; and painting the basement. Renovations for 1955-56 shall include: new pews; and a new heating and cooling system. Improvements for 1956-57 shall include: new baptistery, and a general improvement of the basement. The remaining year of this four-year program shall be spent adding large sums of money to the Building Fund for the construction of a religious education building. It is hoped that by 1959 a religious education building will be under construction. Obviously many emergency renovations will arise which are not included on the list.⁴⁵

Much of this plan was ultimately realized. In 1954-55, the sanctuary was carpeted, received a PA system, and a new communion table gifted to the church by “Mr. William J. Cole of Chicago in memory of his mother.”⁴⁶ The following year saw the extensive renovation of the church’s lower level, including: new rubber floor tile, “cellotex” (Celotex) ceiling panels, fluorescent light fixtures, venetian blinds, and new tables, as well as gas heaters whose purchase and “installation were made possible by a gift of \$100.00 from the pastor’s wife, Mrs. Coretta S. King.”⁴⁷ On the upper level, John Brown and Caressa Williams donated a new drinking fountain for the vestibule in memory of their mother and the church purchased a grand piano “to beautify the worship services.”⁴⁸ During the King period at Dexter, the building was also entirely heated and air-conditioned and a new organ installed in the sanctuary.⁴⁹

Johns. Luker suggests that King’s father may have discussed the relationship between Dexter’s pastor and deacons with Vernon Johns and then passed the information to King junior. Johns had preached at the senior King’s church the weekend that MLK was in Montgomery for his trial sermon. See Ralph E. Luker, “Murder and Biblical Memory: The Legend of Vernon Johns,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 112:4 (2004): 394-95.

⁴⁵ MLK, recommendations made in 1954-55, as transcribed in Evans and Alexander, 72.

⁴⁶ MLK, annual report for 1954-55 and recommendations for 1955-56, as transcribed in Evans and Alexander, 80.

⁴⁷ A portion of the \$6,000.00 spent that year on renovations was directed to work at the parsonage. MLK, annual report for 1955-56 and recommendations for 1956-57, as transcribed in Evans and Alexander, 94.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Evans and Alexander, 208.

Nothing more appears to have been changed in the building until 1957-58 when Dexter expended a significant amount of money—\$3,000.00—on the “construction of a new study for the pastor in the first unit of the church.”⁵⁰ This construction created at least two and likely all three rooms in the suite along the east wall of the building, from north to south a storage room, secretary’s office, and pastor’s study with powder room and closet. The storage room and secretary’s office both had doors opening out into the main room and a connecting door between them. The pastor’s study also had a door into the main room, but this was less conspicuously located on the south partition wall, a position that gave the pastor easy access to the sanctuary and the building’s rear exterior door. The money used to build and furnish this suite was probably drawn from the church’s building fund. MLK had announced the establishment of the fund in 1954 and hoped to have a religious education building under construction by 1959. However, by the fall 1957, the church had only raised \$3,000, far less than necessary for the planning and construction of a new building or addition.⁵¹ This shortfall, coupled with King’s expanding involvement in the civil rights movement, likely contributed to a decision to spend the money on the study, a decision that was “ably backed by the entire church.”⁵²

1960-65—Under tenure of Pastor Herbert H. Eaton, the church was reroofed and hired Milton Love, a professor at the Tuskegee Institute, to develop a master plan for a major overhaul of the church, including the mechanical systems.⁵³ While the plans were ultimately accepted, bids put out, and a contractor hired, very little of this plan was ultimately realized. The rewiring of the sanctuary occurred when the extant light fixtures were purchased and installed.⁵⁴

1977-80—A decade after the acceptance of the renovation master plan produced by Milton Love very little had been accomplished towards its implementation. This situation probably resulted from the method of funding—individual assessments of church members. A number of important things had changed since Eaton’s time at Dexter that made the likelihood of success much more realistic. The most significant was

⁵⁰ MLK, annual report for 1957-58, as transcribed in Evans and Alexander, 125.

⁵¹ MLK, annual report for 1956-57, as transcribed in Evans and Alexander, 107.

⁵² MLK, annual report, 1957-58. It should be noted that this considerable expenditure came only a year after the congregation had raised \$2,500 to help pay for a trip to Africa and Europe taken by the Kings (see Evans and Alexander, 108).

⁵³ Evans and Alexander, 150.

⁵⁴ The fixtures still in use at the church are, in all likelihood, the ones related to this master plan. The exterior sconces and hanging lamps in the sanctuary have the same design. The matched sconces flanking the main door on the upper level postdate a photograph of Civil Rights marchers dated March 6, 1960. See: “African Americans attempting to march to the Capitol from Dexter Avenue Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama,” 6 Mar. 1960, accessed online, 29 May 2009, Alabama Department of Archives and History, http://216.226.178.196/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/photo&CISOPTR=5579&CISOBX=1&REC=3

the April 4, 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in Memphis, Tennessee. His death not only resulted in an unsurprising desire for appropriate memorialization, but also, importantly, commenced the writing of what would become the first historical assessments of his immense contributions to the world. These initial assessments began to identify the key stages of his life and work as well as specific events and locations associated with them, an unfolding exercise that would have helped to redirect national attention back to Dexter. The passage of the Historic Preservation Act of 1966 had also greatly expanded government programming focused on the identification, documentation, and designation of historic buildings and sites at all levels of significance, and the build-up to the Bicentennial resulted in an unparalleled amount of resources being made available for these purposes.

The Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation was tasked by the National Park Service with “identifying sites, throughout the nation, important to the role of Afro-Americans in American history.”⁵⁵ This study recognized Dexter Avenue Baptist Church as a nationally significant site because of King’s leadership during Montgomery’s bus boycott, an event that initiated his “national recognition as a civil rights leader.”⁵⁶ The church itself was the place of “many rallies and meetings” of the Montgomery Improvement Association during the boycott “where Dr. King instructed his followers in non-violent principles, stirred their flagging spirits, and provided inspirational leadership.”⁵⁷ The designation of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church as a National Historic Landmark in 1974 was just one notable outcome of the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation’s efforts.⁵⁸ In practical terms, this official recognition of national significance better positioned the church for obtaining outside funds to proceed with a restoration/renovation project.

In 1977, the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church celebrated its centennial and was able to move forward with definite plans for the long awaited restoration/renovation of its ninety-year-old building. Funding for the \$365,000 project came from the Alabama Historical Commission and the City of Montgomery as well as federal and private

⁵⁵ Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation, “A Summary Report of Thirty Sites Determined to Be Significant in Illustrating and Commemorating the Role of Black Americans in United States History,” December 1973, 1. The report stated that the dearth of sites related to black history officially recognized in the United States stemmed in large part from a documentary record whose make-up preferenced the activities of white Americans as well as a system of site identification that overlooked the vernacular buildings and landscapes most telling of black history.

⁵⁶ Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation, 47. See Part I:B “Historical Context” for further discussion of the bus boycott.

⁵⁷ Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation, 47.

⁵⁸ Marcia M. Greenlee, National Historic Landmark nomination for “Dexter Avenue Baptist Church,” National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1973.

sources.⁵⁹ The church hired H. L. Walker & Associates of Washington, D.C., a firm apparently having experience with historic buildings as it “was on the city’s list of approved architects for such jobs.”⁶⁰ The restoration/renovation fulfilled two needs for the church: to repair and modernize the building and to “restore the church as [a] memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King.”⁶¹ The desire to honor King through the building was further underscored by the change in its name to the “Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church,” which officially occurred at a ceremony held on October 22, 1978 at which Coretta Scott King spoke.⁶²

The planning and execution of the restoration/renovation project took nearly three years. The most obvious change being the replication in steel and concrete of the original wooden stair lost in 1927.⁶³ In reality, work occurred throughout the building and addressed nearly every issue from structure to systems to aesthetics.⁶⁴ On the exterior, this included the repairing and repointing of the brickwork; installation of a new canopy and handicapped accessible ramp at the side entrance into the sanctuary; replacement of the roof, flashing, soffit, gutters, and downspouts; and the restoration of the steeple. On the upper level, the narthex was reconfigured with new stairs down to the lower level, and new stairs up to the balcony with a powder room tucked underneath. “All surfaces of the sanctuary were renewed”—plaster, trim, and paint; the balcony “repaired and renewed for safe occupancy;” a new sound system, wiring, and mechanical equipment was installed as well as a new baptistery under the floor behind the pulpit.⁶⁵

With the exception of the pastor’s office built for King in the 1950s, the lower level was completely rehabilitated. This work included the replacement of the remaining brick support piers with steel columns in the main room as well as new paneling; ventilation

⁵⁹ “The New Dexter Faces the Eighties” (rededication service program), 29 Jun. 1980, Box No. 191699, Dexter Files-Records Retention; Mollie Hoerter, “Local Black Baptist Church Has Rich History,” *The Montgomery Advertiser* 29 Jul. 1979, 19B, 21B; Roberson, 187

⁶⁰ “Minutes of the Restoration Committee,” 17 Sep. 1977, Box No. 191699, Dexter Files-Records Retention. The local architect named to the project was Walter Bush.

⁶¹ H. L. Walker & Associates, estimate for Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, “plan to restore the church as memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King,” ca. 1979, Box No. 191699, Dexter Files-Records Retention.

⁶² Roberson, 187-188; Hoerter, 21B.

⁶³ Given the desire to use the church as a means for memorializing MLK, it is curious that the restoration committee ultimately rejected the Alabama Historical Commission’s suggestion that they retain the masonry stair so that “the building remain[s] as it was during Dr. Martin Luther King’s Administration.” Minutes of the Restoration Committee, 22 Feb. 1978.

⁶⁴ For a complete account of the work, see the architectural drawings and supporting materials in Box No. 191699, Dexter Files-Records Retention.

⁶⁵ “The New Dexter Faces the Eighties” (rededication service program), 29 Jun. 1980.

ducts in furred out chases along the ceiling perimeter; and acoustical tile on the ceiling. The men's and women's restrooms were reconfigured to provide space for a small women's lounge. A new room was created in the southwest corner of the lower level to serve as the "Martin Luther King Memorial Library...which will contain personal mementos of Dr. King and his family as well as resource data on him."⁶⁶ King was also honored with a mural painted on the long wall of the pastor's office suite facing the main room. Dexter deacon John Feagin, Zakee Safeeullah Fishoe, and Arthur Kennedy painted the 10' by 47' mural in 1980.⁶⁷ It "depicts scenes of Dr. King's journey from Montgomery to Memphis. It reflects the segregated facilities of the era, as well as the struggles, sorrows, prejudices, and personalities of the era. Beginning with the bus boycott, it traces the long and tedious journey begun under Dr. King's leadership."⁶⁸ On the surface, the building that was rededicated on June 29, 1980 looked very much as it had for the previous century.

Post-1986—The colored glass in the large windows on the upper level was installed sometime after 1986. The window muntins delineate a pattern of squares and rectangles that approximates the spirit of those which, if not actually in place at the 1889 dedication, were present by 1895. While the overall organization was replicated, the original patchwork of variously colored and textured panes—still extant in the two small lancet windows in the balcony—was not retained. The windows are filled with vibrant panes of colored glass having a uniform quality. The current windows are actually the third generation. Sometime between 1960 and 1973, the original windows were removed and replaced with six-over-six double hung windows filled with milky glass having pale blue and purple coloring.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ *Dexter: Building the Dream* (Montgomery, AL: Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, 1998), 25, container SG6914, folder 69, Public Information Subject Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

⁶⁸ Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, "Church," accessed online, 21 Jul. 2009, http://www.dexterkingmemorial.org/c_church.cfm.

⁶⁹ For 1895 view, see photograph in Boothe, np (263); see also Evans and Alexander, frontispiece, for reproduction. The original windows are visible in a 1960 photograph (see n54). A photograph taken in July 1973 as part of the National Historic Landmark nomination for the building records that the windows had been replaced by that time. These second-generation windows were still in place on January 20, 1986, as documented in a photograph marking a service celebrating the first federal observance of Martin Luther King Day (Dexter Files-Onsite).

B. Historical Context⁷⁰

Montgomery has been rightfully dubbed the birthplace of both Civil War and Civil Rights. It is almost miraculous that two of the nation's pivotal events took place within a few blocks of each other. Who could have predicted in 1830, when slaves were being sold like horseflesh at the present site of the majestic fountain in Montgomery's Court Square, that in less than fifty years freed slaves would begin building their own church on broad Dexter Avenue? Who could have imagined the separation of one city block and one century between the Alabama State Capitol, where Jefferson Davis pronounced the creation of a new nation dedicated to slavery, and the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where both Dr. Vernon Johns and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., led their people away from the legacy of slavery?

Rev. Michael F. Thurman (2001)⁷¹

The history of the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church is a narrative having elements common to the dominant black experience in America as well as one holding exceptional importance for the civil rights movement in the twentieth century and the broader struggle for human rights throughout the world. In the post-Civil War South, religious and educational institutions, sometimes existing as overlapping entities, provided much of the institutional bedrock for the black community. While schools relied heavily on white (mainly Northern) philanthropy and missionary action, the churches emerged more completely from the needs and aspirations of the black community. They provided spiritual and temporal uplift during the uncertainty and fear of the Reconstruction and Jim Crow periods. In the twentieth century, this largely insular function evolved and expanded to include a more proactive stance on civil rights. Congregations throughout the nation, but in the South in particular, had to weigh their options and constantly reevaluate their goals and the desired level of active involvement. Partly an outgrowth of its unique history and partly one of chance, the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church emerged and has remained one of the premier touchstones for the civil rights movement.

The Establishment

The founding of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church occurred at a time when black Americans

⁷⁰ Houston Bryan Roberson's *Fighting the Good Fight: The Story of Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, 1865-1977* (2005) provides a comprehensive and thorough study of Dexter from its founding through the end of the twentieth century. The work invaluable documents how Dexter fits within the context of the Southern black church overall, as well as changes in its function, purpose, and internal structure over time. Given its eventual place within the civil rights movement, Roberson pays particular regard to how the Dexter congregation approached racial equality within the confines of the Jim Crow South. This report will provide a summary of Dexter's history around the time of the church building's construction before addressing the arrival of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1954 and the landmark activities surrounding the Montgomery bus boycott.

⁷¹ Thurman, "Introduction," 21.

throughout the South, a majority being newly emancipated slaves, were founding their first congregations independent of white-run churches.⁷² As was common in the antebellum South, enslaved and free blacks and whites of various denominations in Montgomery were generally members of a single congregation. In the 1840s, the white members of the Montgomery Baptist Church (later First Baptist Church) voted to discard the somewhat more racially equitable environment of worship and leadership within their church. This change created what Houston Roberson described as a “church within a church.” The arrangement required black members to meet separately for worship and business, but did not give them any degree of autonomy as all their activities were still controlled by the white members.

This split arrangement continued at the Montgomery Baptist Church through the Civil War. In 1867, approximately 600 black Baptists, or roughly two-thirds of the entire congregation, departed and founded the Columbus Street Baptist Church. A decade later, this congregation fractured; as chronicled by Charles Octavius Boothe, Dexter’s first pastor, in 1895, the “Dexter Avenue Church...is a secession from the Columbus Street Church.”⁷³ The reasons for the split are not wholly evident. It is generally held that the Second Colored Baptist Church coalesced in 1877 around a Sunday school operated in part by white missionaries, and a group of Columbus congregants who either departed the church because they disagreed with the “emotional” character of the worship or because they found the church too inconvenient from their houses for regular attendance.⁷⁴

In January 1878, the leaders of the other two Baptist congregations in Montgomery, one white and one black, met to formally establish the new church. They gathered in a former slave trader’s pen that had housed the Sunday school for a year, described by Evans and Alexander as a place “where the odors and the filth and signs of the horrors of slave life were evident.”⁷⁵ They likely met in this location for a year until they purchased the property at the southwest corner of Dexter and Decatur. This property included a building at 8 South Decatur Street that they used as a temporary church. During the time the congregation was meeting at this address the institution was referred to publicly in city directories as the “Second Baptist Church (Colored).” Market Street was renamed Dexter Avenue in 1884 and the church’s cornerstone, which is dated 1885, records the name “Dexter Ave. Baptist Church.” However, popular adoption of the name “Dexter

⁷² Unless otherwise noted or quoted directly, information about the early history of the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church is drawn from Evans and Alexander, chapters II and III, and Roberson, chapter 1.

⁷³ Boothe, 60.

⁷⁴ Evans and Alexander dated the departure to 1877, but Roberson has found that the split occurred earlier with the group having representation at the 1875 Colored Missionary Baptist Convention of Alabama “where they were formally recognized as a fledgling but promising independent congregation” (Roberson, 10). It is agreed that the early meetings of the disaffected Columbus congregants occurred in the residence of Samuel Phillips at 630 High Street.

⁷⁵ Evans and Alexander, 10.

Avenue Baptist Church” seems to have occurred only after they permanently relocated to the new building on Dexter Avenue.⁷⁶ With its modern, attractive, and prominently located church, the young congregation looked more confidently to the future. Charles Octavius Boothe observed in 1895 that in the two decades since the church’s founding, “Many other good and pious persons have been added to their number, so that no church in the State can now boast of a people more thrifty, aspiring and refined.”⁷⁷

An Active Role in Civil Rights

While, over time, the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church attained a reputation for having a cautious and conservative approach to race relations and the nascent civil rights movement, the congregation was hardly apathetic. Indeed, its resolve to build their church on a prominent location two blocks from the state capitol and remain there was, alone, a strong and clear statement of confidence, autonomy, and visibility. Dexter’s congregation contained a cohort of comparatively well-off members employed at nearby Alabama State College whose livelihoods depended on state resources, which constrained a more outspoken stance on racial uplift and equality.⁷⁸ Still, both the church and its many intellectually inclined and successful members found ways to have a positive impact on the struggles of the African-American community in Montgomery.

Early in the century, Robert Chapman Judkins, Dexter’s pastor from 1905-16, encouraged and oversaw the congregation’s direct involvement in an array of Progressive Era social movements, including universal suffrage and temperance, and decried all forms of violence against blacks.⁷⁹ Mary Fair Burks, a Dexter congregant, founded the Women’s Political Council (WPC) in 1946. Jo Ann Robinson, another member who, in 1950, became the WPC’s second president, noted in her memoir that the organization:

was formed for the purpose of inspiring Negroes to live above mediocrity, to elevate their thinking, to fight juvenile delinquency, to register and vote, and in

⁷⁶ The 1887 city directory for Montgomery recorded the Second Baptist Church (Colored) church at 8 South Decatur Street. When the next directory appeared in 1891, both the church name and its physical location referred to Dexter Avenue. Evans and Alexander claim (13) that the “small frame building” at 8 South Decatur was “torn down to make room for the erection of a church edifice;” however, continued use of that address in city directories during the present church’s construction period suggest that the frame building may not have been razed until after construction was completed.

⁷⁷ Boothe, 60.

⁷⁸ Troy Jackson, *Becoming King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Making of a National Leader* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 26-27.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 24. See also Roberson, Chapter 2.

general to improve their status as a group. We were ‘woman power,’ organized to cope with any injustice, no matter what, against the darker sect.⁸⁰

The harsh and humiliating treatment of African Americans that occurred on Montgomery’s segregated buses became one of the WPC’s major concerns.

As the treatment of returning black World War II veterans under the Jim Crow system became particularly unpalatable and unacceptable to growing numbers of Americans, Dexter member and businessman Rufus Lewis concerned himself with the education of black World War II veterans and voter registration. He was also became a close and strong supporter of Vernon Johns, Dexter’s charismatic nineteenth pastor (1947-52).⁸¹ Dexter’s history and the high educational attainment of its members fostered conditions favoring greater involvement and leadership in the civil rights movement, but it was Johns who made more explicit the relationship between words and thoughts, and acts. Historian Ralph E. Luker has noted that Johns possessed a “muscular Christianity” and he strenuously “condemned the soul-crippling acquiescence in racial discrimination that the white South demanded of black southerners in return for allowing their bodies to survive.”⁸² From economic self-sufficiency to the singing of spirituals during services, Johns tested the beliefs and apparent complacency of Dexter’s congregants. Although his eccentricities and unapologetic, at times seemingly radical, approaches to racial uplift ultimately led to conflict with the Dexter deacons that resulted in his resignation, Johns left a strong and useful legacy to the church summarized by Houston Roberson as a clear understanding “that religious dogma and doctrine were useless without action.”⁸³ Such an understanding would prove vital to the events that would shortly consume Dexter, Montgomery, and the nation and the world.

Martin Luther King Jr. Arrives at Dexter

When Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) was installed as Dexter’s twentieth pastor in October 1954 few people could have predicted the extent and rapidity of his rise in the civil rights movement. He was born into a prominent African-American family in Atlanta. Both his maternal grandfather and his father (Martin Luther King, Sr. or “Daddy” King) were pastors of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, and it was in that church where MLK was ordained a minister in 1948. Except for the time of his pastorate at Dexter, MLK remained formally associated with Ebenezer, first as an associate pastor and later as co-pastor. He was an intelligent and highly motivated student. In 1948, at the age of nineteen, he received a Bachelor of Arts in sociology from Morehouse, which

⁸⁰ Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*, ed. David J. Garrow (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 23.

⁸¹ Roberson, 142; Jackson, 30-31.

⁸² Luker, 398, 405.

⁸³ Roberson, 101.

was followed by a Bachelor of Divinity (Crozer Theological Seminary, 1951) and a Doctor of Philosophy in Systematic Theology (Boston University, 1955). In 1953, MLK married Coretta Scott, a student at the New England Conservatory of Music, with whom he eventually had four children. In the summer of 1954, Coretta Scott King graduated and MLK researched his dissertation; in September of that year they moved to Montgomery, Alabama.⁸⁴

MLK arrived to pastor a well-established Baptist congregation having a distinct character, which, according to Houston Roberson, was based from its earliest years in its “worship format, the relationship between deacons and pastors, the comparatively elite status of many of its founders and members, and the presence of two colleges nearby, which provided sources of employment and education.”⁸⁵ From early on the church adopted a formal approach for worship, indeed the desire for such worship may have been one of the principal reasons for its establishment. As recently as 2001, Michael Thurman, the current pastor of Dexter, observed: “the Dexter congregation has always prided itself as being somewhat reserved in its worship style.”⁸⁶ Another significant element of Dexter’s functioning was the association between the deacons and the pastor, which was on far more equal terms than in most black churches where the minister generally held greater influence and control.⁸⁷ This element remained an integral part of how the church functioned into the King years as Vernon Johns, who immediately preceded King, purportedly encouraged the aspiring preacher to quickly devise a comprehensive plan for how he would like the church to develop and not to waver if he ran counter to the deacons about implementing it.⁸⁸ On Johns’s direct or indirect counsel, King moved quickly, stating unambiguously in recommendations made upon his installation:

the pastor should [not] needlessly interfere with the deacons, trustees or workers of the various auxiliaries, assuming unnecessary dictatorial authority...[but] the pastor is to be respected and accepted as the central figure around which the policies and programs of the church revolve.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ For more on Martin Luther King, see Troy Jackson, *Becoming King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Making of a National Leader* (2008); Lewis V. Baldwin, *There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King* (1991); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (1988); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and The Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1986); and Stephen Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1982); David Levering Lewis, *King, A Biography* (1978).

⁸⁵ Roberson, 11.

⁸⁶ Thurman, 23.

⁸⁷ Roberson, 12-13.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 118-119; see also pp13-14, n44

⁸⁹ King, recommendations, 1954-55.

Martin Luther King was twenty-five years old when he began his pastoral work at Dexter and his outlined recommendations were likely as much a reflection of his youth and drive as a desire for control. Indeed, over his first year at Dexter he worked diligently to reenergize committee work and outreach.⁹⁰ Very quickly, however, the Dexter congregation would have to lend his great potential to Montgomery's greater African-American community.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott

While in time Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. have popularly become the key players in the Montgomery bus boycott, they were part of a much larger cast, a number of whom were anticipating and encouraging this sort of social and economic resistance for a number of years. Under the leadership of Jo Ann Robinson, the WPC was, arguably, the group most central to sowing the seeds of the boycott and helping to launch it. For example, the night before the boycott began Robinson single-handedly produced thousands of fliers calling for a one-day boycott and explaining why action was long overdue. E.D. Nixon, a Pullman porter, union leader, and the local president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was a long-time leader in Montgomery's African-American community and became a key figure of the boycott as treasurer and a viable link between the classes. Indeed, Troy Jackson largely agrees with the claim by Dexter member Thelma Rice:

‘The bus boycott was Mr. E.D. Nixon’s idea. He made such a claim on numerous occasions and I believe it. Mr. Nixon had the wherewithal, the tenacity, and commitment needed to make things happen, but lacked the ability to communicate with all people and groups. He had the necessary raw skills. Reverend King brought the refined dimension required.’⁹¹

Rice's comment is useful not so much in that it ascribes the origin of the boycott to Nixon, but more so as a demonstration of the manner in which the city's various black leaders complemented each other in the development of the boycott, cooperation that was vital to sustaining it over its year-long duration.

On December 5, 1955, the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) elected Martin Luther King as its first president. They nominated MLK to a leadership role because he was not yet embedded in the community, meaning that there was a greater chance for full and sustained commitment for the boycott by all factions and classes. The MIA had formed in order to facilitate the boycott of public buses, which responded, generally, to long-standing, unequal seating policies and, immediately, to the December 1 arrest of Rosa Parks. The seating system in Montgomery was particularly demoralizing for black patrons because the seemingly hard boundary between the white and black sections could be ignored by white passengers. If the white portion of the bus

⁹⁰ Roberson, 131-39.

⁹¹ As transcribed in Jackson, 101.

was full, the driver could force black patrons to give up seats in their own section. Historian J. Mills Thornton has noted that the “vagueness of the bus seating situation with its sliding racial demarcation line that had to be often adjusted by the driver, often times vocally, created a negative atmosphere of injustice daily.”⁹² Black social activists in Montgomery felt that the arrest of Parks, the local chapter secretary of the NAACP, was a viable case on which to build a major protest. Within days of Parks’s arrest, Montgomery’s black community rallied and imposed a nearly full boycott of the city’s buses.⁹³ The boycott lasted over a year, officially terminating on December 21, 1956.

The MIA initially identified Montgomery’s segregated taxis as a means of getting black residents around the city; however, the local government quickly responded by threatening drivers with a loss of their operating licenses if they did not charge minimum fares for each passenger. As a result, the MIA turned to a system of carpooling, which, despite continued harassment by the local authorities and attempts to break the boycott with the enforcement of various and sometimes obscure regulations, was ultimately successful. Less successful were the convoluted negotiations (and non-negotiation), and legal jockeying between the MIA, and the City of Montgomery and the transit company, Montgomery City Lines. Although economic losses to the bus company and downtown businesses mounted, white Montgomeries tried to outmaneuver the boycott through intimidation and never seriously entertained full desegregation of the buses. Black Montgomeries were well aware that their demands needed to be theoretically palatable to the white community. As recalled by Jo Ann Robinson,

In Montgomery in 1955, no one was brazen enough to announce publicly that black people might boycott city buses for the specific purpose of *integrating* those buses. Just to say that minorities wanted ‘better seating arrangements’ was bad enough. That was the term the two sides, white and black, always used later in discussing the boycott. The word ‘integration’ never came up. Certainly all blacks knew not to use that word while riding the bus. To admit that black Americans were seeking to integrate would have been too much.⁹⁴

⁹² J. Mills Thornton III, “Challenge and Response in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956, in *The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956*, ed. David J. Garrow (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1989), 341. In addition to the essays in *The Walking City*, for the bus boycott, see Donnie Williams and Wayne Greenhaw, *The Thunder of Angels: The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the People Who Broke the Back of Jim Crow* (2005); Steward Burns, ed., *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (1997); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (1988), David J. Garrow, ed., *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (1987); Catherine A. Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow: The Desegregation of Southern Transit* (1983), and Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958).

⁹³ As an iconic figure in American history, information on Parks is readily available in publications on the civil rights movement and more specifically on the bus boycott. She authored an autobiography with Jim Haskins, entitled *Rosa Parks: My Story* (1992), which was created for young readers. See also Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks: A Life* (2005).

⁹⁴ Robinson, 23.

In the end, it was the United States Supreme Court affirmation, in November 1956, of the lower court decision in *Browder v. Gayle* that ended the segregation of the buses, which in turn ended the boycott a month later.⁹⁵ These things matter less in the larger picture, however, as observed by law professor Robert Jerome Glennon:

although the boycott did not [directly] produce integration, that was the perception, and perceptions may be more important than reality. The boycott came to exemplify the power of an African-American community to mobilize and successfully resist and defeat segregation.⁹⁶

In the wake of the bus boycott, black Americans could take a broader view and focus not only on lessening the daily injustices of segregation in a particular locale, but to demand their full civil rights as citizens.

The Montgomery bus boycott heralded a new direction and cohesion for the civil rights struggle, and it also launched MLK into the national and international spotlight. As president of the MIA, Dexter's young pastor rose to the challenge and provided able leadership for the boycott, ultimately emerging as the nation's preeminent civil rights leader. His oratorical skills were particularly brilliant, full of confidence, inspiration, and intellect, having been undoubtedly honed with the Sunday sermons that he delivered at Dexter. As he rose in visibility during the boycott, however, he became a target of white anger. This anger quickly escalated from late-night telephone threats to a bomb set off on his front porch on the evening January 30, 1956 while his wife, infant daughter, and a friend were at home. Although no one was physically hurt, the dangers of the boycott as well as King's position as its public face became acutely known, conditions that foreshadowed his assassination twelve years later. After the boycott, in 1957, civil rights leaders throughout the south banded together and established the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization whose strategy centered on the use of nonviolent action towards ending segregation in the United States. MLK was elected as the SCLC's first president and would remain so until his assassination in 1968.

Dexter Avenue Baptist Church is not only central to the bus boycott because of its association with MLK; it was also one of the places where black leaders gathered for the duration of the boycott and a number of Dexter's members were actively involved in its structure and operation.⁹⁷ Although initially wary, black churches quickly became rallying points and, as Jo Ann Robinson has noted, "the black ministers and their

⁹⁵ Rosa Parks was not a named plaintiff in *Browder v. Gayle* because her case was already moving through the Alabama courts. Black leaders feared the federal court would decline to take the case if Parks was included. Robert Jerome Glennon, "The Role of Law in the Civil Rights Movement: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1957," *Law and History Review* 9 (Spring 1991): 68.

⁹⁶ Glennon, 60.

⁹⁷ See Roberson, 139-47.

churches made the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956 the success that it was,” through their participation in the boycott and the opening up of their buildings for meetings and logistics.⁹⁸ Even while MLK was increasingly absent from Dexter, the congregation never wavered in its commitment to its pastor as the scope and purpose of his life dramatically changed. This support reflected dedication not just to MLK, but to the civil rights movement as well. Houston Roberson has observed, “since the pastorate of Vernon Johns, members’ minds and hearts at Dexter Avenue had favorably inclined toward the church’s participation in the social activism of the civil rights movement.”⁹⁹ In its efforts to serve the spiritual and communal needs of its current members, the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church moves purposefully forward with the knowledge of its significant place in the history of civil rights in America as well as its more representative history as a black congregation in the South.

PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. **Architectural character:** The Dexter Avenue Baptist Church occupies a high-profile site on Dexter Avenue at the southwest corner of its intersection with South Decatur Street. Dexter Avenue connects the commercial heart of downtown centered on and around Court Square with the Alabama State Capitol and may be considered the city’s most prominent thoroughfare. While perhaps modest to twenty-first century observers, the red brick church, featuring Gothic Revival and High Victorian elements and details, stands out and maintains gravitas against the stark white classicism of the adjacent buildings comprising the capitol complex.

The church’s architecture is rooted both in metropolitan trends and in rural traditions. The sanctuary level is situated over a full basement, an arrangement that, because of a steep grade change from front to back, positions the main entrance a full story above Dexter Avenue. This arrangement was very common for urban American churches built in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries. Although this spatial organization and masonry construction are a nod to more urban influences, the building reads more clearly as a country church. The uncomplicated rectangular footprint, front-facing gable roof, and central tower on the facade, as well as the mixture of such Gothic elements as tall windows with pointed heads and Victorian ones like brackets and molded detailing have much in common with contemporary churches being constructed in small towns and rural crossroads communities.

2. **Condition of fabric:** Superficially, very good.

⁹⁸ Robinson, 53.

⁹⁹ Roberson, 146.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. **Overall dimensions:** 91'-3" x 43'-8"
2. **Foundations:** The foundations are of load-bearing brick approximately 2'-0" thick.
3. **Walls:** The exterior walls are all load-bearing brick laid-up in a running bond that alternates one course of headers with five courses of stretchers. On the front and side elevations, the wall steps back at the first floor, forming a simple water table. The four corners of the building are articulated by pilasters that continue along the lateral walls. Because the north and east sides of the church are more visible (running along Dexter Avenue and Decatur Street, respectively), the pilasters on these walls are embellished by a single vertical channel that suggests fluting. While the pilasters provide a degree of added stability, their function is likely more aesthetic—providing greater mass at the building's corners and breaking the long side walls into five bays.

North: The north (main) elevation is the most ornate. The wall is divided vertically into three parts by an engaged tower at center that extends 1'-1" from the plane of the wall. The tower contains the lower level doors, main doors on the sanctuary level, and two small windows and a plaque with the name and the year "1885" on the gallery level. Above the roofline the frame tower has two stages with a pair of louvered lancet openings on each of the four sides. It is sheathed in horizontal siding and the setback between the stages is articulated by dentils. The brackets around the top of the tower support a lightly kicked pyramidal roof having a large spike at its apex topped by a vane. Tall lancet windows are positioned on either side of the tower.

The front wall contains nearly all the High Victorian architectural elements. The roofline is enlivened by a bracketed cornice placed over crow-stepped masonry corbelling. The bracketed cornice along both lateral walls continues around the front of the building in a manner that became popular in the mid-nineteenth century. The vertical channels on the facade pilasters contain decorative molded bricks. Although a reconstruction in modern materials, the double flight of stairs up to the main door keeps the spirit of the Victorian details. The superstructure of the stair is steel, as are the newel posts, the treads and landing floors are of concrete, and the handrails and balusters are of wood.

East and West: The east and west walls are nearly identical in organization. The walls are divided into five bays by the pilasters with the outer bays being wider than the equal-sized ones at the center in order to accommodate the entry foyer on the north and the pulpit on the south. The windows in the middle three bays are not all fully centered within the bays. The southernmost bay along Decatur Street contains a door that provides direct access into the sanctuary. The brick walls are

corbelled out slightly near the cornice, which is embellished by brackets positioned over the pilasters. Pairs of brackets appear at the corners and above the fluted pilasters along Decatur Street while single brackets are used on the west wall.

South: The upper portion of the south wall is plainly rendered with the corner pilasters and lightly bracketed cornice providing the principal areas of embellishment. A single-story extension original to the building extends out from the south wall. It does not extend across the full width of the building and is topped by a modified hipped roof. Two window openings (one now blocked) are positioned in the south wall. A shed-roofed extension on the east side provides access to the area behind the pulpit and a semi-open enclosure on the west screens the air-conditioning compressors.

4. **Structural systems:** Load-bearing brick walls. The floor joists are tied into the walls and supported on the lower level by eight pairs of steel columns.

5. **Openings:**

- a. **Doorways and doors:** The building has four exterior doorways. The facade (north) has two sets of double doors centered on the wall, one over the other. The doors are substantially constructed of wood and are embellished on both sides by four rectangular, deeply molded panels arranged vertically, the two on top much larger than the two, almost square ones on the bottom.

The upper entrance is reached via a double set of stairs that meet at a landing in front of the vestibule. The opening for the main doors is articulated by a molded brick, Gothic-arched frame with a stone keystone. The space is filled at the top by a large stained-glass transom in the plane of the tower, set over a rectangular opening that appears to have never held doors. The main doors are set back creating a small sheltered vestibule that have a wall and ceiling embellished with beadboards contained within molded frames. This vestibule extends approximately 1'-0" into the narthex.

The two other doorways are located on the south end of the east wall along Decatur Street. One opens directly into the sanctuary just north of the choir, and is positioned within the lancet opening of the southernmost bay. It is located at the top of an exterior handicapped ramp constructed of brick and concrete with a steel handrail. The door is sheltered by a flat-roofed canopy suspended by steel wires and having a beadboard ceiling. The heavy wood door is molded on both sides, with the exterior being more deeply paneled than the interior, perhaps an effort to make the colonial-type, "cross-and-bible" arrangement of panels more like the

Victorian-inspired ones on the front. The fourth door is located in the plane of the east wall, but in a small, one-story extension to the south. The flush steel door has applied wood molding suggesting two, large, nearly-square panels arranged vertically with two small rectangular ones arranged horizontally at the top of the door. Paint ghosts indicate that the two top panels were part of an earlier applied molding scheme having a “cross-and-bible” arrangement.

- b. **Windows:** The north (principal) facade features two tall lancet windows symmetrically placed on either side of the main door. As with the masonry arch defining the entrance, each of the windows are contained with molded brick frames with stone keystones and sills. Large, double-hung sash fill the lower, rectangular portion of the opening with a fixed transom in the pointed arch above. A pair of small lancet windows above the main doors has similar features as the larger ones. Each of the lateral walls features five lancet openings similar in composition as the large ones on the facade. Although the double-hung sash is in theory operable, all of the large stained-glass windows are contained behind storm windows with transparent glass. The southern opening on the Decatur Street elevation also contains a door.

On the lower level, a double-hung window contained within an opening in the brick having a segmental head is positioned under each of the upper level windows on the lateral walls. Window wells on both sides of the building are necessary because of the steep gradient.

- 6. **Roof:** The roof structure is made up of evenly spaced trusses composed of substantial timbers notched and bolted together. A system of purlins and common rafters carry the roof decking. The tower is also composed of heavy timbers with X-bracing for added support.

C. **Description of Interior:**

- 1. **Plan:** The plan is straightforward and one common to churches in cities with the principal story raised up from the level of the street. This arrangement removes the sanctuary from street noise, increases light and ventilation, and more intensively utilizes expensive real estate by tucking additional meeting and social areas under the sanctuary, within the mass of the building. All building circulation is located at the front and rear. There are external stairs up from the sidewalk to the foyer and interior stairs in the foyer down to the lower level and up to the balcony overlooking the sanctuary. At the rear, there is access from the pulpit down to a side door and stairs down to the lower level.

2. **Flooring:** The floors on the main floor and gallery are all wood, covered over with carpet; only the portions of the floor beneath the pews remain uncovered. The lower-level has a concrete floor covered in tile in the main room, bathrooms, and kitchen, and carpet in the offices and library. The rear stairwell and entrance area are concrete and tile with steel treads.
3. **Wall and ceiling finish:** The walls of the sanctuary are largely of plaster and/or wall board. The wall finishes appear to be attached directly to the masonry surface of the lateral walls, while the rear wall between the sanctuary and the foyer and the apse behind the pulpit are framed out and finished. Wainscoting extends around the sanctuary from the floor up to the window sills. The ceiling of the sanctuary is pressed metal. Except for the dividing wall between the sanctuary, which is fully paneled, the walls and ceiling of the entry foyer are sheathed in plaster and/or wall board with wainscoting. Except for the wall with the civil rights mural, most of the lower level walls are paneled. The ceiling is composed of a system of dropped acoustical tiles. An exposed area near the pastor's office shows surviving beadboard above the dropped ceiling. The duct chases around the ceiling perimeter are furred out and covered in wall board.
4. **Doorways and doors:** Three doorways open from the narthex into the sanctuary: a set of double doors serving the center aisle and a single door serving each of the side aisles. These doors are wood with an arrangement of four panels similar to the front exterior doors. This panel arrangement is based on the two doors opening into the apse of the sanctuary, behind the pulpit, which are the only two original doors remaining *in situ* in the building. The door to the east of the pulpit accesses the rear stair and exterior door, and the one on the east opens into a room used for storage, and contains parts of the organ and public address system.

Except for the folding door at the bottom of the stairs up to the narthex, which are paneled, the remainder of the lower-level interior doors are the flush type typical of the second half of the twentieth century. The door into the library in the southwest corner is fully glazed.

5. **Trim and woodwork:** At the front of the sanctuary, the apse behind the pulpit is set off by a tabernacle frame composed of fluted pilasters topped by consoles faced with beadboarding surmounted by a modest entablature. The entablature and impost blocks are embellished with dentils. The overt classicism of this focal point contrasts with paneling in the choir stand behind the organ, the pulpit, and other furniture, which exhibit Gothic detailing. The balustrade enclosing the choir stand and the beadboard facing below are all typical of late-nineteenth-century woodwork; wood wainscoting extends around the space from the floor up to the sill line. Similarly articulated wainscoting is found in the entrance foyer. The frames for the two doors behind the pulpit appear to be original to the church's construction and are deeply molded while the frames for the doors from

the entry foyer, dating from the 1977-80 restoration, are unadorned strips of polished wood. The large lancet windows in the sanctuary and entry foyer are framed by simple trim executed in plaster.

The walls of the lower level are almost all paneled. Most of this paneling dates from the 1977-80 renovation, the significant exception being the office constructed for MLK in 1957-58, which retains its original paneling, which is typical for its period.

6. **Mechanical:** As with most buildings constructed in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Dexter incorporated new lighting, heating, water, and sewerage technologies in a piecemeal way as they became available, when there were significant improvements made to the technologies, and/or as the church had the funds. All of the utilities and mechanical systems currently in use in the building were either replaced or significantly upgraded during the 1977-80 restoration/renovation. For details about the extent of this work, please consult the architectural plans and supporting materials in Box No. 191699 of the Dexter archives located at Records Retention in Montgomery, Alabama.

PART III: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

In addition to surviving records, the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church benefits from two important publications. In 1978, Dexter members Zelia S. Evans and J.T. Alexander produced *The Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 1877-1977*, which was compiled and published to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the church. It contains numerous transcriptions of primary source documents as well as short essays related to aspects of the church's history. The volume is particularly important now that most of the church records have been moved to off-site storage. Houston Bryan Roberson's *Fighting the Good Fight: The Story of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 1865-1977* (2006) is the first scholarly treatment focused on the landmark church. It provides both a comprehensive narrative of Dexter's history as well as an attempt to relate the church to broader historical contexts.

Very little is known about church builder William Watkins and architect Pelham J. Anderson. The census returns for Montgomery, Alabama (1870, 1880, 1900, and 1910), and the Montgomery city directories (1866, 1873, 1878, 1881, 1883-84, 1887, 1891, and 1893, various compilers) provided much of the baseline data about their lives presented in this report.

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PART IV: PROJECT INFORMATION

The Dexter Avenue Baptist Church project was cosponsored by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Southeast Regional Office, both of the National Park Service. Support was provided by Reverend Michael F. Thurman, pastor of Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church. The documentation was undertaken by HABS, Richard O'Connor, Chief of Heritage Documentation Programs, under the direction of Catherine C. Lavoie, Chief of HABS. The project leaders were historian James A. Jacobs and architect Jason W. McNatt. Architects Daniel J. De Sousa, Anne E. Kidd, and Jason W. McNatt conducted fieldwork and produced the measured drawings; the large-format photography was produced by Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) photographer Jet Lowe; and historian James A. Jacobs researched and wrote the history. The documentation was produced in 2009-10.